

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Working as a Team on Standards

Cahuenga Elementary School, California • April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners

Practice: Develop Academic English

Highlights

- Cahuenga's shift from instruction guided by textbooks to instruction guided by standards
- How they worked as grade-level teams to figure out what the standards meant—to internalize them and make them meaningful
- How they analyzed release items from the state test
- The role of a grammar series in developing academic language related to the standards

About the Site

Cahuenga Elementary School (K-5)

Los Angeles, CA

Demographics

64% Hispanic, 35% Asian

70% English Language Learners

81% Free or reduced-price lunch

Cahuenga provides bilingual instruction in Spanish-English and Korean-English

in a four-track, year-round school. Distinctive features of the school include:

- Strong core reading program; also arts, music
- Regular formative assessment; database support
- Emphasis on standards; ongoing cross-grade teacher collaboration
- Teaching writing, with use of rubrics, starting in kindergarten
- Multiple forms of peer interaction
- Stable leadership; strong learning community

Full Transcript

I'm Lloyd Houske, principal of Cahuenga Elementary School.

We were so pleased when the state came out with standards for us, because before that, we basically just did whatever our textbook told us to do. The textbook was a bible for us, and we were under the assumption that if the state approved the textbooks, everything the state wanted us to teach had to be there. But we realized as we kept looking at things that it didn't work out that way. Now we've gone into a basal system that has controlled vocabulary, and it has been adapted to the California state standards, but not all standards are taught at the same level. Some children need to have more time spent on some standards than they do on others, and so when we got them, we were really thrilled. We really didn't know how to use them, though. We got them in a big book, an inch thick, and we had the standards for every grade level, and we started working with them, but not really getting our hands dirty enough with them. Until you really use standards and discuss them and look at them so that you can almost internalize them and be able to say what are the standards for your grade level, they are not going to be really meaningful for you.

We started figuring out ways of looking at those standards. We were lucky because our district has assessments that go along with standards, so we can see whether or not we are meeting those standards.

We run into some problems when it comes to the large areas such as comprehension, which is made up of a lot of subskills. They don't always pinpoint that so well, so then we found that we had to go into it ourselves.

The standards are not so simple. I think in terms of a first grade standard—and the standard had to do with prediction, and this was a comprehension skill—the standard says, "Identify the sign words or key words that help prove the prediction." We are working as a grade level, first grade, on this and we looked at each other and said, "What on Earth does this mean?" and we really had to think about what it meant. Then we said, "Ohhh, this means words like first, second, primary, or this is what happens next, or that if a little boy was lost, and he was found, then you'd probably look for the word lost or found in that sentence in there that would give you the clue for it." If we hadn't had the

standard, we wouldn't have known to think about something like that. We would have just worked on the prediction, but not the clues as to whether or not the prediction was correct.

When we first got the standard, someone had this wonderful idea that the teachers should write the standard on the board every time that they were going to teach something. Well, I've always found that teachers are really smart, and they didn't like it, and they didn't do it. If I would breathe on them hard, they would do it, but they said, "It's not real," and it dwindled away [although] I worked hard on it.

Our state gives release questions for the CST, which is the California Standards Test, so you can see what kinds of questions they'd ask. They won't ask the same questions again, so it's not a matter of cheating or anything. We started going back and taking a look at the release questions, saying, "Why are children having problems with these things?" and then looking at the standard. You have to get your hands using the standards. You can't just talk about it; you've got to use them.

So, we would take a standard, and say, "How can you teach this standard? What can you do within this class?" When we got the release questions, the whole staff went through, and we took each of the standards—how many questions were asked on each of the standards, what type of a question was it, what was the design of the question—and we said, OK, we got these little four-by-six cards; now pull them out and use them when you're teaching. This becomes like a tool for you to help you become more acquainted with it.

Children cannot write what they cannot say, so, of course, oral language is really emphasized a great deal. And we do a LOT of writing. When we first started in with our writing, we started doing journals. Then we started realizing that our journals didn't really move too far, but when you got the standards you realized that children had to be more directed in what they were writing in the journal. It wasn't just a diary. And right from the beginning it really follows the state standards so well. It talks about what are the appropriate sequence words to use between paragraphs at different grade levels. It talks about having a "hook" for that first topic sentence, for getting the reader's attention. It's a more difficult program in some ways than the thinking maps. In this one, you have to, again, work at it a little bit more. It develops that language, and I was so impressed with what our writing scores are. We are highest in content. It's the verb usage and the spelling where we fall down more, but the content is there, and it's really good content because of this.

We're kind of mavericks here, and the state does not have a grammar book adopted, and I wasn't even sure I wanted one, but my AP thought it was a great idea. So we got it, and it was one of the wisest things we did, because the grammar book gave structure to English for the children so that they really understood how the language worked much more effectively, and we just would have relied on them doing it naturally, because the standards address very specific areas, and the grammar book really does that.